

## Absurd Perspectives in W. H. Auden's *The Unknown Citizen* and Salah Abdel Sabour's *Winter Song*: Comparative study



Mustafa Talib Jawad

Jabir Tbn Hayyan university for medicine and pharmaceutical Sciences, Iraq, Najaf

**ABSTRACT:** This paper has been concentrating on comparing between two poetic texts, W. H. Auden's *The Unknown Citizen* and Salah Abdel Sabour's *Winter Song*. The comparison is accomplished relying on principles of Albert Camus' Absurdism. It is a comparative study that figures out differences and similarities considering specific perspectives in both poems. The study argues the images of modern man that have been embodied in these two chosen poems. The paper also studies how these poets employ symbolic language to express their sentiments and emotion toward the modern man in present and future; it is an investigation of the life of the modern man which is emptied from all creativity. Lastly, it infers that The individual presented by both poets complains that he/she has been divorced as if he/she is never born or come to the world. Life is filled with an endless suffering, pain, futility, emptiness, and restrictions. Therefore, the question which has been raised by Auden whether the individual is happy and free or not is explained in this paper. In both literary texts, the disappearance of happiness can be observed because happiness is a very part from the concept of freedom. The poets believe that the modern man is not totally free.

**KEYWORDS:** Absurd, W. H. Auden, Salah Abdel Sabour, Winter Song, The Unknown Citizen, modern man

### 1. INTRODUCTION

W. H. Auden is a British-American poet, born on 1907 and died on 1973. He has several poetic productions. Valuably, Auden's contributions to literature is not less than other known American poets'. Some of his well-known poetic texts are *The Unknown Citizen*, *Funeral Blues* and *The Age of Anxiety*. On the other hand, Salah Abdel Sabour (1931- 1981) is an Egyptian free verse poet and playwright. He wrote several crucial poetic and dramatic works, such as *Night and Day*, *Winter song*, *Dreams of the Old Night* and *The Tragedy of Hallaj* (play). Applying Albert Camus' principles of the absurdist philosophy on *Unknown Citizen* (1940) and Abdel Sabour's *Winter Song* (1977) is comparably sharing a great deal in this paper to clarify the way that a modern man follows in the modern age.

In accordance with Albert Camus, the term absurd denotes something impossible; it is more significant to observe that it supports something that is paradoxical. The absurd is not one structure or entity, but it is concerned with two counter concepts; as Camus (1991) referred to it lyrically, "bursts from the comparison between a bare fact and a certain reality, between an action and the world that transcends it." (30). The word absurd is a combat or conflict in which the challenge is continuous and viable, there is a relationship related to the individual's experience. When the individual is faced with the known world, it leads him into strangeness, a relationship with several explanations and expressions. In short, the world is meaningless. (Camus 1991, pp. 6-29.).

*The Unknown citizen* is a kind of satirical elegy written in praise of a man who has recently died and who lived what the government has deemed an exemplary life. This life, the poem implicitly critiques the standardization of modern life, suggesting that people risks losing sight of what it means to be an individual when they focus exclusively on the same status symbols and markers of achievement (like having the right job, the right number of kids, the right car, and so forth).

The poem also builds a frightening picture of a world ruled by total conformity and state oppression, in which a bureaucratic government dictates and spies on its citizens' daily lives. On the other hand, in brief, *Winter Song* is a subjective poem, in which the poet clarifies how he has been informed by winter that he will face death alone. Although He emotionally addresses himself showing the enjoyment of the differences of the seasons of a year, he pessimistically tells the readers that he will die in isolation, where none is beside him. He confesses that all the years he spent were meaningless. His youth is meaningless and his life is nothing because he will pass away from others. In accordance with the speaker's text, the place that he lived in is empty and aimless, whether people, requirements of life, happiness were surrounding him or not, nothing leads him to achieve happiness. Therefore, connections between these two poems are extremely observed. However, both texts deal with the principles of absurdity, such as meaninglessness of life, humanism, emptiness of contents in life... etc. comparing between these poems is a main and significant deal in this paper.

### 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Several Arabic and English studies have been accomplished about these two poems. The critics and researchers have been writing these poetic texts from different perspectives. For instance, identity is quite important for individuals, to avoid losing identity, one

## Absurd Perspectives in W. H. Auden's *The Unknown Citizen* and Salah Abdel Sabour's *Winter Song*: Comparative study

needs to free himself from the practice of taking for granted whatever is taught by the society; when one succeeds in an attempt like this, one tastes real freedom; he is then ready to construct the meaning of the world, though that meaning is purely subjective. (Das, 2019, p. 47). Accordingly, a human being's identity is extremely linked with freedom. Meanwhile, Aljaberi refers to Salah Abdel Sabour's *Winter Song*, that the speaker suffers from winter nights for the exile which tortures him: women and alcohol will not guide him away from being far away from siblings, friends and home: whether the Arabic poet lives in his home or in exile, suffering will continue torturing him until the end of his life; the poet suffers from a kind of inner conflict, between existence and his being (Aljaberi, 2005, p. 89). As a result, *The Unknown Citizen* plays on the panoptic gaze and the use of biopower of modern states over their citizens, showing what their true faces are (Poudel, 2021, p. 254).

Another number of researchers and critics wrote studies about *The Unknown Citizen* and *Winter Song* considering various aspects. No researcher or critic has written about these poems comparably. Therefore, the gap that this paper will fill is the comparison between Auden and Abdel Sabour's mentioned poems. Regarding Albert Camus' *The Myth of Sisyphus* and *rebel*, this study clarifies a number of the absurd problems, such as endless suffering, alienation or isolation and cruelty of world in both poems. The main aim of the study is to compare between the images of absurdism in both poems; it also aims to conclude whether the modern man is happy or not? He is free or not?

### 3. DISCUSSION

Within this paper in light of Camus's philosophy, the word "absurd" denotes the impossibility of anything; more importantly, though, it affirms something contradictory. Camus put it poetically when he said that the ridiculous "bursts from the comparison between a bare fact and a certain reality, between an action and the world that transcends it." It is not one structure or substance, but rather is focused on two counter notions. (1991, page 30). The definition of ludicrous is a battle or fight where the opponent is persistent and realistic and where there is a connection to the individual's background. The familiar world pushes the person toward strangeness, a relationship with multiple interpretations and expressions. To put it succinctly, the world has no purpose. (Camus, 1991, pp. 29).

According to Camus, the ridiculous is tainted. People experience the shock of incoherence and unfamiliarity with the outside world since they are a unitive species. Camus analyzes how people think about life and suggests that the only connection between a man's thinking and the ludicrous world is a "divine equivalence which springs from anarchy" (Camus, 1991, p. 51). (Pages 28–51 in Camus, 1991). According to Camus (1991), the ridiculous supports the notion that it can either be rejected outright or ignored since the conflict that drives it cannot be reconciled (48). Where there is a clear harmony between the two highlighted elements, there is a relationship between them.

Awareness of the world is a wish which relies on the human mind of unconsciousness of the absurd. It is in a case of ignorance and blindness (Camus, 1991, pp. 41-54). But, the conscious (or absurd) of human being who lives in satisfaction of the absurd is various. In short, the dualities of awake/asleep and light/dark, the absurd man has seen the light without effulgence. (Camus, 1991, p. 54). Absurdism depicts the case of human being, it describes how a man has desire, purpose and striving to the meaning in life.

In *The Unknown Citizen*, W. H. Auden begins describing how the "Bureau of Statistics" discovered a statue that belongs to a soldier. According to the Bureau of Statistics, nobody ever made a formal complaint about him. The other reports about his behavior all say that he was basically the perfect citizen, because he did everything he was supposed to do in order to serve his society. He worked the same job his entire life until he retired, apart from a break when he served in the War. The soldier is anonymous, he is known as number only, no more no less. It can be regarded as a literary technique, the statue which belong to unknown soldier symbolizes every citizen or human being lives or submits to the authorities of a specific geographical area. "The absurd is essentially a divorce" (Camus, 1955, p. 21).

It means that there a big comparison between the mind's intention and disappointment of the world. Accordingly, the soldier has been forgotten and treated as a number, it shows a kind of a pointless world. He sacrifices his life but was unknown as if he was divorced or never born. On the other hand, in Abdel Sabour's *Winter Song*, the poet metaphorically compares his end to an end of the winter. Winter ends alone to move into another season of a year. Therefore. He personifies an abstraction such as winter as a human being whose life ends.

I will die alone

Die alone

One winter. (Abdel Sabour, 1977)

The poet complains that he will die in alienation and exile as if he has been divorced or never born. "That I live in a naked world" (Abdel Sabour, 1977). No friend will be beside him. This is the futile life that both poets attempt to fathom. He worked in a factory and never got fired, but satisfied with his employers, Fudge Motors Inc (Auden, 1979, p. 85). The unknown soldier is satisfied with the way he lived.

That he held the proper opinions for the time of year;

When there was peace, he was for peace: when there was war, he went. (Auden, 1979, p. 85)

He obeys the manager of the factory that he worked in and never fired. He accomplishes whatever the government asked him for. No objection, no question, no suspiciousness. When they need him for wars, he goes for fighting. When there is peace, he will live

## Absurd Perspectives in W. H. Auden's *The Unknown Citizen* and Salah Abdel Sabour's *Winter Song*: Comparative study

peacefully. Despite his hard work, he had fulfilled his obligations ungrudgingly as a duty-bound citizen, a loyal worker, an ideal supporter of modern commercialism, a good husband and a passive follower of the prevailing opinion. However, it shows futility of the life. Specifically, when Albert Camus comments "The absurd is lucid reason noting its limits" (Camus, 1955, p. 36). 'lucid reason' is the reliable guide of the search for meaning in this world.

The winter tells me  
That one winter just like this  
I will die alone (Abdel Sabour, 1977)

Abdel Sabour continues repeating the way he will die. He claims that it is a disappointed way for a man who spent his life writing poetry. Even poetry doesn't heal him anymore. His suffering continues because he wastes the years of his age with no clear reason. He recognizes that the life he gained is purposeless and pointless. All what he achieved is not for a clear reason.

Poetry my ruin, for this  
Everything's run to waste  
For this, I became a dorp-out  
For this, ... (Abdel Sabour, 1977)

The poet confirms how he has been suffering of the pointless world, futile life and alienation. Particularly, when he reveals "Everything's run to waste". Therefore, Camus mentions "nothing its limits". The poet declares that he becomes no more that "a drop out for this..." He has been in a situation of conflicting between existence and his being.

On the other hand, W.H. Auden raises a question saying "the question is absurd" (1979: 85). Whether an individual is free or happy. It is an argumentative matter. Even the question itself is a face of the absurd.

(To JS/07 M 378  
This Marble Monument  
Is Erected by the State) (Auden, 1977, p.85)

In these lines, he focuses on how the modern individual's life is. The unknown soldier is referred to as a number only as if he is not born or come to the world.

He was fully sensible to the advantages of the Installment Plan  
And had everything necessary to the Modern Man,  
A phonograph, a radio, a car and a frigidaire. (Auden, 1979, p. 85)

Everything the unknown citizen needed was available. These necessities of the modern man can be simply gained. The consumer goods produced by companies necessary for high grade living of a modern man were found in his possession. He appreciated the installment plan of companies and got goods like phonograph, radio, car and fridge on installments. Secret service researches into public opinion reported with satisfaction that his political opinions have been in harmony with the current opinions of the state for the time of the year. He believed in whatever he was asked to believe. He was an opportunist. In peace time he worked for peace. In war time, he joined war.

Was he free? Was he happy? The question is absurd:  
Had anything been wrong, we should certainly have heard. (Auden, 1979, p. 86)

The poem ends on a final, rhyming couplet that takes a big detour from the conventional topics that have occupied the speaker so far. Now he asks two questions saying "Was he free? Was he happy?" that really do seem interesting. The speaker's confidence in this line – "we certainly should have" is downright chilling. But, of course, the big joke here is that the speaker defines happiness in the negative, as things not going wrong, instead of as things going right. These lines are powerfully ironical. The poet shows sharply the total regimentation of the lifestyle and the viewpoint in an urban, artificial community. The individual man is found to have lost here his personal entity and inclination and become a mere number in the all-pervasive social existence. He is to conform to the set patterns, whatever those may be, for any deviation from the same is liable to be discredited as abnormally and eccentricity. This is a situation, highly ironical yet tinged with pathos.

Both poems, W. H. Auden's *The Unknown Citizen* and Salah Abdel Sabour's *Winter Song* describe argumentatively the modern man. The poets in this paper employ vivid images to show the way that human being used to live. The image employed in *The Unknown citizen* argues that however the life of modern man is, the question of the absurd is raised. On the other hand, the poet of *Winter Song* shows that in whatever the modern man spends his/her life, the of his/her life will be in the same way that his life ended. Accordingly, he wasted his life in writing poetry. He considers his life as a meaningless and filled with futility and naked contents. Everything is empty, he suffers from absolute aimless life. The unknown soldier's end is offensive. They discovered him as number, even without his name. Therefore, his life is aimless and futile. "I rebel-therefore we exist" (Camus, 1956, p. 22). Both poets, attempt to make the reader familiar with the problems of the absurd life and raise philosophical questions about existence, subjectivity, being, meaninglessness, endless suffering and futility. The intentions of the poets' texts are to rebel against the miserable reality around them, against the bitter meaningless world.

## Absurd Perspectives in W. H. Auden's *The Unknown Citizen* and Salah Abdel Sabour's *Winter Song*: Comparative study

### 4. CONCLUSION

The Unknown soldier symbolizes the modern man who suffers endlessly. W. H. Auden indicates several images to show the way that the modern man lives or behaves. Was he free? Was he happy is question that had better be raised. freedom leads a man to be a rebellion, raises reasons, questions and suspiciousness. Despite all the necessities were available, he lived aimlessly, with pointless choices. On the other hand, in Abdel Sabour's *Winter song*, the poet clarified his endless sufferings, he lived in alienation and wasted his age with no clear reason. The image of Futility is extremely observed in both poems.

The similarities between these two poems are: Regarding Camus' absurdism, both poems urge to issue the way of the modern man or modern world became. They presented different images of meaninglessness, futility, purposelessness and pointless world. Auden produced an image of a satisfied modern man, and raised an argumentative question whether the modern man was free or happy. The inference of this study is, although he lived with all the necessities he needed in his life, he was not happy because he was not totally free. On the other hand, the image of the absurd life that is presented by Abdel Sabour's poem. A man who spent or wasted his life in writing poetry. His life will have ended alone and away from home, friends. He presumed that his life was wasted for no clear reason. He lived aimlessly in pointless world. That leads to infer he was not happy because he was not adequately free.

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